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#### GAMBLER'S GEND. By Joe K. Jones

AM STAPLES rode into Barton City on his blaze faced roan. His lean and wiry figure was tall in the saddle. Dust of the road powdered him from head to foot, "Firelight" tossed his head against the reins as Sam tied him to the rack in front of the Iron Handle

saloon.

"Hold on, Firelight, there's nobody throwing a gun on us-yet," he soothed the skittish horse. But Sam was alert as he nushed through the slatted batwing doors. A heavy, dark man frowned up from a poker game, put down his cards as Sam crossed to the bar and lined up

his chips in a pile. "Hang on to your chips, boys, I'll be right back. Got business," he said in a loud voice,

nodding toward Sam with a broad wink that promised sport with the stranger. "All right, Nez." the poker players agreed.

"Howdy," he greeted Sam at the bar.

Sam nodded.

"Passin' through?" "No, been in the saddle too long," said Sam.

"Heard a man named Stoker's paying top wages to good hands. Do you know where I can find him?"

At the mention of Stoker's name heads turned from the poker game. The gambler's eyes narrowed on Sam.

"Dunno. But I'm givin' yuh good advice. It's healthier to move on than to ride for Stoker." came the low threatening reply. He turned his back on Sam, drew his gun and sent six bullets winging through the back wall in a perfect circle. He holstered his gun and turned to Sam as townspeople crowded up to the batwing doors, drawn by the firing. They all waited for Sam's move.

"Nice shootin"," Sam drawled softly, His cool gray eyes smiled right into the sambler's dark frown. Sam drew his Colt and aimed straight at Wharton's circle Six swift explosions snapped from the Colt's smoking mouth. Gasps rose from the crowd at the door. Staples had shot another circle - inside Wharton's! The confident sneer on the gambler's face turned to red-faced anger, as Sam said quietly, "I'm aimin' to stay in Barton City." "I'm Nez Wharton," the gambler said in a

harsh voice, "and what I say goes in this town. Move on, there's no room for yuh!" "You the Sheriff?" inquired Sam coolly, re-

loading his Colt.

The poker players laughed raucously. "There sin't no Sheriff in Barton, Last two

men tried lawin' are six feet under." Wharton fingered the notches on his gun. "Take your horse and git. I'm givin' yuh till sunup tomorrow."

"Sam Staples is my handle. I'm aimin' to stay and I'm still looking for Stoker." His

defiant eyes took in Wharton from Stetson to boots. Then he turned, pushed his way through the crowd and angled across the street to the

Running after him came a short, red-faced man with peppery white hair. "I'm John Stoker," he panted. "Heard you were lookin' for me."

"I got word you're lookin' for top hands. I been ridin'-"

"You're hired, man, you're hired!" sputtered the lively rancher.. "With shootin' like that, you're hired! Nez Wharton has already sunned down my ramrod and rustled my best stock over the border. There hasn't been a Sheriff for almost a year. Gamblers and thieves running wide open. If I Bere twenty years younger . . ." His short white beard shook with anger.

"Let's get goin'," interrupted Sam, "I'd like to see the layout."

"All right," said Stoker, calming down, "But are you sure you want to stay? I'm not paying gun wages for a picnic."

A grim smile curved Sam's lips. "I wasn't quite sure before I hit town, Stoker, but Nez

Wharton fixed my mind."

Word spread through Barton City with the speed of a flash flood that the new man was taking on the ramrod job at Stoker's. The town slept uneasily that night, waiting for the deadline set by Wharton.

The sun came up next morning as Sam was

riding Firelight out of Stoker's headquarters. He headed for the range through Rib Rock Pass, where the road channeled through outcropped rock. As they entered the Pass, Sam reached down and loosened his Colt from the

Wharton's sharp grating voice reached down suddenly from the rim of the pass, "Draw yore

gun pronto, Staples !"

Sam stood stock-still on Firelight. He could see Wharton out of the corner of his eye. Then, with the sudden speed of forked lightning, he threw himself forward off the horse, twisting to the right as he pulled his Colt. He fired at the same instant as Wharton did. Sam saw the gambler's hat fly off and he felt a thud in his side like the kick of a mule. The double explosion echoed between the rock walls. His side throbbing, Sam slithered to cover on the other side of the road. Wharton raised his head over the rim and fired down. Stone chips cut into Sam's face as he traded shots. A curse of pain came from above as Sam's slug clipped the swarthy outlaw's ear. Wharton's anger exploded into wild shoot-

ing that emptied his gun. Sam spaced his fire to keep the gambler's head down as he crawled flat against the earth, leaving a bright red rib-

bon in the dust behind him.

Silence above meant that Wharton was reloading. Swiftly and gracefully as a panther, Sam crossed the road and climbed the rocks behind the Barton City desperado. Bracing himself against the pain, he threw himself on Wharton and knocked his gun clattering down the rocks. The outlaw jerked free, landing a meaty right against Sam's face, drawing a trickle of blood. Sam staggered back, breathing hard.

Then he came reeling forward with savage thudding blows to Wharton's ribs. Backed against rocks, the gambler lowered his head in a bull drive for Sam, who sidestepped, chopping down at Wharton's neck. Momentum carried the gambler straight over the rim to crash on the narrow road below. Sam took a breath and leaped after him, slamming his boots against Wharton's chest. Sam felt ribs crack under his high heels. He pulled Wharton to his feet and drove stunning blows to the square chin. Wharton soon lay writhing beside him. Surrender signalled from his pain glazed eyes and his torn mouth. He was through! Sam looked down at Barton City's gambler

chief and waited for breath to come back to

him as he reached for his Colt. His shield front flannel shirt was a rag wet with blood and sweat. Wharton stirced.

"Get up. Wharton," Sam said, "We're heading for town." He held the gun steady on Wharton's heart. Without a word Wharton mounted his horse. Sam rode Firelight behind him. When they reached town a crowd gathered, expecting to mourn another victim of the lawless gambler. When they understood that Wharton was Sam's prisoner, cries went up for a hemp rope to put an end to his evil days. They would have dragged him from his horse, but Sam spoke up sharply behind him. "Any hombre lookin' for a taste of lead can take Nez Wharton off his horse,". He eased the Colt around slowly. "We're goin' to handle this lawful. Where's the lockup?" Hands pointed to a dusty one story adobe. He waved Wharton in and locked the door

John Stoker forced his way out of the crowd in front of the jail and grabbed Sam's hand. The little man pumped up and down in happiness. He turned to the people with his arm around Sam.

"Friends, Sam Staples has cut down that rattlesnake." He tossed his head in the direction of the jail. "I hired Sam yesterday as my ramrod and I'm firing him today-" Standing beside him Sam almost jumped in surprise. "Because," Stoker continued, "I here and now nominate Sam Staples to be Sheriff of Barton City," Loud cheers responded to the nomination. "What say, son?" He turned to Sam.

AM hesitated, "I don't know," he said slowly, "I never saw myself as a badge toter. I was only trying to be peaceful when that ten cent pickpocket got in my way."

John Stoker spoke up. "Sam Staples, are you walking out on the honest people of the town after you brought law and order?"

"No," replied Sam, shifting uncomfortably, "I like it right enough in Barton City. It's just. well, if I take the job I'll have to make one condition."

"What's that?" asked Stoker. "I won't wear a badge," replied Sam,

"Done!" shouted Stoker jubilantly amid general laughter, "Your Colt is badge enough," he said, as he led the new Sheriff away to begin his term of office.

THE END

























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